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DISTANCE EDUCATION
Eight Steps for Transforming an Organization

Michael Simonson
Co-editor

A distance education leader is a visionary capable of action who guides an organization's future—its vision, mission, goals, and objectives. The leader guides the organization and its people who have faith in the leader, and have a clear understanding and acceptance of the organization's worthwhile and shared vision and goals. A distance learning leader has competence in knowing, designing, managing, leading, and visioning distance education (Simonson, 2004).

One question distance education leaders ask is "how do I transform my organization so it successfully adopts appropriate distance education applications?" John Kotter (1999) wrote clearly and forcefully about organizational transformation. By considering his ideas and relating them to distance education, a strategic distance education transformation can be implemented. By carefully managing the process an organization can reduce mistakes and multiply successes.

Here are the steps in the process.

First, establish a sense of urgency. Most likely this will be by identifying the major opportunities offered by adopting distance education strategies. Outcomes should be identified, such as more, and more diverse, stu-

dents, cost savings, more compelling instruction, and even more satisfying interaction with learners.

Second, form a powerful planning group. The team that develops the plan for an organization must have enough power to lead the effort, and have the correct opinion leaders so the members of the organization will be changed. Change comes because of a manager's directions, and because of the opinion leader's influence.

Third, create a vision. Visioning is one of the most important but most poorly understood aspects of the change process. The vision directs the transformation effort and is a rallying cry for the organization.

Fourth, communicate the vision. The planning group is the key here. Opinion leaders and powerful managers can present the vision, but they must also *live* the vision. Changes should be observable. Trainers and teachers should see changes in their leaders.

Fifth, give power to those who act on the vision. Risk-taking should be encouraged, and the activities and actions of those who adopt distance education should be supported.

Sixth, plan for and create short-term wins. Visible, early, and impressive distance educa-

tion events and activities should be orchestrated by the planning group. If trainers and teachers can see the relative advantages of adopting distance education strategies they will be more willing and more ready to try on their own.

Seventh, combine and collect successful distance education activities to produce more change. Hire, promote, and encourage those who practice distance education, and continue to support ongoing activities.

Eighth, incorporate distance education successes. Clearly show how distance education events are connected to the organization's mission, and to other educational and training

activities. Continue to develop new leaders to ensure a succession of support.

A leader can control change, an inevitable process. The eight steps described above will help start the distance education transformation—if it is not already too late!

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